

Sowing the seed

Locally born Australian artist John Young examines the seeds of the Hong Kong diaspora in his new show, writes **Clare Morin**

It was during the explosive year of 1967, as anti-colonial riots rocked Hong Kong, that an 11-year old John Alexander Young Zerunge was bundled onto a plane and sent to boarding school in Australia. Half a century later, that boy has grown into one of Australia's most celebrated and collected painters. Yet, the seed of dispersion set in motion during that fateful year has remained a driving force in his art.

This fortnight, Young will be addressing this topic at a solo exhibition *1967Dispersion* at 10 Chancery Lane Gallery. "All my projects have been based on the fact that I am part of a diaspora of Hong Kong people, who proceeded to travel," explains the artist in his soft, measured voice, over the phone from his studio in Melbourne. "The diaspora for me is to be able to live in any condition at all. As an artist, it's to be able to give shape to those situations, even to the ends of the Earth."

Young's sense of self rests heavily in the diaspora. The term, which originates in the Greek word meaning

"One thing I've learned is there is only the landscape and yourself, and life and death, that's it"

'the sowing or spreading of seeds' is used to refer to the collective of people who are forced to leave their homeland. Since that trip aged 11, Young has continually identified with his bi-cultural nature, and a will to travel. "When I feel the need to gain some sort of clarity about my work, I tend to travel to extreme places," he admits. "I think it's because being somebody from a diaspora, the directive is to travel, to go outwards, to be dispersed. I think somebody once said that for a person in a diaspora, there are two principles – danger and opportunity."

Accordingly, Young's first art exhibition was in no way traditional. It was held in 1982 on the front door of a small stone cottage in the Irish fishing village of Rosroe, Connemara. He was travelling through Europe in an existential experiment, following in the footsteps of philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, and exhibited a sole photograph of his travels. From those humble beginnings, Young has risen up the ranks of Australia's artistic elite. His move into painting, meanwhile, has been very well received, from his initial *Silhouette* paintings, to the celebrated *Polychrome* and *Double Gourd* series that was revealed in 2006 at the major retrospective of his work *Occident/Orient*, staged at the TarraWarra Museum of Art, Victoria. Yet, beyond his beautifully crafted paintings, Young has constantly questioned philosophy, postmodernism and post-colonialism.

Recently, the artist has found himself increasingly revisiting the fateful year that pushed him out of Hong Kong. "The more I thought about the diaspora, the more I wanted to go back to the roots of what actually propelled people out of a place," he reflects. "Usually they are disasters or abject conditions that make people really want to leave their homeland. It's just a very personal account."

The year 1967 was arguably the first time that a true Hong Kong diaspora began to form. Tensions were mounting in the summer as pro-communist leftists pushed for demonstrations against the British government. On May 6, 1967, a riot broke out at a plastic flower factory in San Po Kong as workers clashed with the management. The following day riots spread out across the territory, with the upheaval lasting another six months. The turbulent times led many Hongkongers to emigrate. Young references the events with the use of historical photographs. For example, *Wishforce* depicts a crowd of seated Hongkongers staring above them with idealistic wide eyes – adjacent to them, and balancing the work, is a plastic bucket that is an intense, communist red. "As the riots



STEPHEN OXENBURY

Tracing history *Wishforce* (right) and *Young*



the abstract and the very, very highly coded content."

While this exhibition represents a homecoming of sorts, Young is by no means returning to roost. Following his Hong Kong show, he will be trekking out into the wilds of mid-winter Antarctica with his son, on a photographic and video project. Increasingly, Young says he is drawn to landscapes: "I do get my inspiration from extreme conditions. I just got back from doing a project in the deserts of central Australia. I was doing a video project dealing with the fact that central Australia is one of the sparest places on Earth and I guess Hong Kong is one of the densest, and seeing how I could configure that whole situation... The desert is so interesting; one thing I've learned is there are only the landscape and yourself, life and death, that's it. All other aspirations pale into inconsequence." Profound words, indeed, from one of Hong Kong's most brilliant far flung artists. *1967Dispersion* opens Thu 27 at 10 Chancery Lane Gallery. See listings.

Interview

Simon Birch



CALVIN SIT

Second life The acclaimed artist stands upon the paintings he made while facing death

Clare Morin talks to the Hong Kong-based artist who has survived cancer and is returning in full force with two new shows

When were you diagnosed with cancer?

In February of this year. I got diagnosed with something called NKT-cell lymphoma, which affects about ten people a year here in Hong Kong. It's a very, very rare form of cancer and not many people survive. I was told I would have less than 20 per cent chance of surviving, and would die this year.

And you got treatment immediately?

I had a battle plan; it was a project to manage. I did Western medicine, Eastern medicine, crazy therapies, nutrition. But of course the heaviest part was chemotherapy and radiotherapy for four months. That was pretty hardcore. I've never been in so much pain in my life. But sometimes it's good to experience real hardship. It teaches you to be a human being again; it's a really humbling experience, especially when you're an arrogant git like me.

Have you recovered now?

Yep, 100 per cent. All the tumours have

vanished. You're not really given the all clear for a couple of years, but so far I'm all clear.

How did this affect you as an artist?

It's made me more honest. What it's done is it's made me let go of any inhibitions and insecurities I had as an artist. [Before] I worried what people thought, I don't give a fuck anymore. When I paint now, I paint exactly what I want to paint. I don't think about the commercial outcome, I don't think about how it's perceived. I've never been so energised or motivated about my art. I fuckin' love it. I'm just overflowing with ideas, plans and schemes.

Tell me about your show at the Louis Vuitton gallery

I won the Sovereign Art Prize last year which was sponsored by Louis Vuitton. They showed my work in their store and loved it; they gave me a free suit which I was pretty happy about! They kept an eye on me when I was sick. When I got better they wanted to do a show, I told them I was writing a book about my life, surviving cancer and my art. I documented my whole experience through cancer, visually as well as in diary form. I had two friends, photographers Stanley Wong

and Wing Shya, who photographed me while I was sick. At that time I thought I was going to die, and I told them, you know what it would be an interesting project for you guys to watch someone die. They were both very keen, so we took all these photos – which will be included in the show. When I recovered I took photos of all the people who helped me to survive. My photos just happened to be colour, Stanley's just happened to be black and white. And when you look at them collectively, his are all very dark and mine are all very light; out of the darkness into the light.

What about your involvement in Valerie Doran's exhibition *Looking for Antonio Mak* at the Museum of Art?

I had this concept from day one, to do an installation of a real live tiger sat in the Museum of Art. For me that would be a beautiful thing. The museum art staff didn't say no, but there is this bunch of bureaucrats who have a say in what goes on in the museum. They said 'No way are you putting a tiger in the museum, that's dangerous.' So I said fine, fuck the tiger, let's get a horse.

I found a trained horse; they said no, they were worried the smell or the dirt would infect other pieces of art in the museum. Damien Hirst puts sharks in tanks, they're alright. Chris Ofili puts elephant dung in the paintings – there's a room in the Tate Modern with his paintings covered in elephant shit! Then I said okay, I'm going to film this tiger, and I would like to play the film on the outside of the building, let me project a beautiful tiger running around. They said no. The Tourism Board got involved and said you're only allowed to show things on the side of the building that are good for tourists or something like that. You can't have a piece of art on the outside of the art museum, that's not allowed.

Finally, I said I will show my film inside, here's my budget – and they said no, there's no budget. Then the curator, Valerie, said she'd give me HK\$30,000 out of the budget. Thirty grand doesn't pay for ten paintings. How can you do a major exhibition in a huge space for peanuts? I decided I would show a film of the tiger and finance the whole thing myself. But my one cherry on the cake is I took the \$30,000, folded the \$100 notes into origami tigers, and will give the whole lot away at the opening. I thought that would be a beautiful irony to take the government's money and give it back to the people. The interesting thing will be to see if the people who come to the show will come for the art? Or will they just come to get the cash?

Out of the Darkness opens Wed 19 at Louis Vuitton Gallery; Looking for Antonio Mak opens Thu 20 the Museum of Art. See listings.

Preview

The Confucius Code



The good old days Be Together (2004)

Pao Galleries

Saturday 22-December 4

Like many of his contemporaries, Beijing-based artist Jing Kewen's paintings are inspired by China's collective memories from the 1950s to 70s, the turbulent era that contained those mammoth mistakes of Mao's megalomania: the Cultural Revolution and Great Leap Forward. Yet, unlike the cynical visions oft painted by many of his generation, Jing's visions of the era are infused with positivity.

This fortnight, 15 of Jing's large-scale oil paintings are being unveiled at the Arts Centre. The dramatic paintings are based on anonymous, old photos that the artist picked out from flea markets in Beijing and Shanghai. Transferring these images onto canvas, Jing's paintings are meticulous recreations full of rich, vivid colours and delicate strokes. The paintings convey a sense of peace and happiness, all the more surprising when you discover that Jing's father was persecuted during the political campaigns of the late 60s. "To be honest, there was very little beauty in that time, but I just concentrate on the little happiness that there was," he explains. "If you look at it another way, the environment was not polluted then, life was easier than now – besides the political struggle – and people were soulful."

Jing describes the ordinary people depicted in his paintings as representing "mortal heroism." "Real good looks are about having a spirit and ideals, and that can be read on the facial expression. Sadly, people started to lose their spirit after the 80s, and such expressions disappeared." Although his paintings are a world apart from his contemporaries – who commonly indulge in cynical realism and political pop – Jing suggests that he is making an equally valid comment on life in China. "Satirising society has become the main trend of Chinese contemporary art, but I just want to paint China at its best. I am criticising as well, because all the beauty in my paintings is missing in our society now." *Emily Liu Yi*

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